

SAINT CYRIL THE GREAT OF ALEXANDRIA AND THE MURDER OF HYPATIA

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Saint Cyril the Great of Alexandria, twenty-fourth pope and patriarch of the See of Saint Mark (412-444), is one of the greatest popes of Christian antiquity. He was a distinguished teacher and an eloquent preacher. From the early years of his accession to the papacy, Saint Cyril proved himself to be a godly man of strong personality.

[Saint] Cyril of Alexandria was not only one of the finest Christian theologians of his day, he also stands out in the ranks of the greatest patristic writers of all generations as perhaps the most powerful exponent of Christology the church has known and, after [Saint] Athanasius, the writer who has had the greatest historical influence on the articulation of this most central and seminal aspect of Christian doctrine. (McGuckin, 2004, p. 1).

Saint Cyril is a common father of the universal Church and his Cyrillian formula, *one incarnate nature of God the Word* – μία φύσις τοῦ θεοῦ λογοῦ σεσαρκωμένη (mia physis tou Theou Logou sesarkomene) is the cornerstone of all ecumenical dialogues on Christology.

During the joint commission of the theological dialogue held between the Orthodox Church (Byzantine) and the Oriental Orthodox Churches in Saint Bishoy Monastery, Egypt, 20-24 June 1989, the following was stated in the agreed statement signed by the representatives of both families:

Throughout our discussions we have found our common ground in the formula of our common father, St. Cyril of Alexandria: mia physis (hypostasis) tou theou logou sesarkomeni, and in his dictum that ‘it is sufficient for the confession of our true and irreproachable faith to say and to confess that the Holy Virgin is Theotokos’ (Hom: 15.crf. Ep.39).

J.A. McGuckin states that:

For the Eastern Church he is the father of Orthodox Christology par excellence; a great exegete as well as a spiritual guide, a Saint in the full range of his doctrine and his life’s energy and focus, the two aspects being inseparable in the Orthodox understanding of the nature of theology and sanctity. (McGuckin, 2004, p. 1).

Constantine Drastellas, a contemporary Greek Professor of Theology writes:

Cyril was a great theologian, he was the most distinguished Saint of Byzantine Orthodoxy and exercised such an important influence on the

ecclesiastical doctrine which, apart from Athanasius, was not exercised by any of the other Greek fathers. And, as it has been said...there is none among all the other fathers whose works have been adopted so extensively by ecumenical Councils as a standard expression of Christian Faith. (Drastellas, 1969).

The Greek Church regards Saint Cyril as the ultimate authority on all Christological questions. He was called the "Seal of the Fathers" by Anastasius Sinaita in the 7th century, and given the title 'Doctor ecclesiae' in 1882. A doxology taken from the Greek Orthodox Church – "Hail Translucent star, defending warrior to the Holy Virgin who shouted out above all the hierarchs at Ephesus that she was the Mother of God... Rejoice most blessed Cyril, spring of theology and river of the knowledge of God. Never cease to intercede with Christ on our behalf" (McGuckin, 1995, p. 32) – exemplifies the high esteem held by churches other than the Alexandrian Church.

The Syrian Orthodox Church also venerates Saint Cyril in her liturgy in the Anaphora of Mar Jacob the Brother of the Lord in the Commemoration (ܡܡܠܟܐ *shomloyo*) of the Ascetic Fathers and Teachers (ܡܠܦܗܐ *malphone*) according to Antiochene Syrian Orthodox rites:

particularly Mar Qoryllos (Cyril) the Great, the high tower who is in steadfastness, and with all sincerity proved that the Word of God became man, our Lord Jesus Christ, the incarnate. (Diocese of Mount Lebanon, 2002, p. 160).

In the liturgical life of the Coptic Church, Saint Cyril is mentioned in the Minister's Absolution where the celebrant priest (being a Pope, bishop, or priest) together with the entire congregation are absolved through his mouth before the commencement of the liturgy; he is also mentioned in the commemoration of saints during the liturgy. In addition, daily in the Midnight Psalmody the Church asks for his intercession for the forgiveness of sins.

It is an historical inaccuracy and an injustice to accuse Saint Cyril, Pope of Alexandria (412-444 A.D), of instigating the murder of Hypatia the pagan philosopher (415 A.D), since doing so results in an ill-informed and historically unfounded allegation against the much celebrated Coptic theologian and 'Pillar of the Orthodox Faith.'

The life of Saint Cyril is well known as being characterized by piety, holiness and a love for defending the Truth. The biography of Saint Cyril does not cite any event or action on his part, which may lead us to believe that he was responsible for the philosopher's murder. In fact, not only would it be naive to assume that Saint Cyril should be held accountable for the murder of Hypatia, but such a conclusion necessarily avoids analysis of a larger socio-cultural context of religious life in fifth century Alexandria. Insisting on such an act of brutality ultimately undermines Saint Cyril's upright faith and strong moral character—a persona not only revered by Coptic Orthodox Christians, but by Orthodox Christians throughout the world.

The writing of history is never completely objective, but always intermingled with the politics of power. The historian always has a political, religious or social agenda that is promulgated by his/her writing of a certain type of history, and there is

always a larger structure of power which directs the historian's pen. This means, that we must ultimately ask the question: Why have some sources placed the blame on Saint Cyril and how might doing so further their own political agendas? And ultimately, then, we must ask: Why should we accept these historical documents which blame Saint Cyril for the murder of Hypatia as recalling some sort of objective truth? Why should we accept these accusations without challenging their veracity?

This is the same phenomenon, for example, that has occurred with the mistaken label of the Coptic Orthodox Church as 'MONOPHYSITE' (i.e. those who believe in one and only nature. However, the Coptic Church believes in one united nature out of two natures in our Lord Jesus Christ, in which the dynamic existence of the natures continue to be present without mixture, mingling, change, or separation) it is, no doubt, a dominant historical narrative which seeks to further a specific type of history *without* considering the counter-narrative (that the Coptic Church does *not* adhere to monophysitism). The question here is: Why do so many historians label the Coptic Church as monophysite? Because they have not critically engaged the sources and have not recognized the structure of power that is embedded within this inaccurate historical narrative. So it is important to challenge the very documents which make such claims, and any good historian must do this faithfully.

This article is a response, a counter-narrative of sorts, to some of these dominant historical writings which naively place undue blame on Saint Cyril for the murder Hypatia.

The First Years of Saint Cyril's Papacy

The first four years of Saint Cyril's papacy were stormy; he was required to defend the holy Orthodox faith against Novatian heretics (who refused the repentance of those who denied their faith through persecution), he had to respond against the violence and intrigues of the Jews in order to save his flock, and he had to instruct his people and keep them from pagan philosophy. Quite simply, Saint Cyril had to fight on many fronts. In addition, Orestes the prefect of Alexandria (who wanted to appoint Archdeacon Timothy as patriarch instead of Saint Cyril from the beginning) created many problems for Saint Cyril at the outset of his episcopacy. The following excerpts from various historical works convey this very point:

A. Louth states:

In 412 he was elected bishop to succeed his uncle: he was not the preferred choice of the civil authorities and the early years of his episcopate were uneasy (Young, Ayres, and Louth, 2004, p. 353).

S. J. Davis says:

From the time of Cyril's election in 412, the bishop had found himself in sharp conflict with the civil arm of the Alexandrian government. He had been elected despite the vigorous opposition of the local military leadership (2004, p. 72).

F. Young writes:

Alexandria was in any case a cosmopolitan city given to tumult and riot, with inter-racial feuds of an endemic nature. The 'third race'—the Christian populace—stood flanked by pagans and Jews, still strong in influence and numbers. Did Cyril stir up trouble?

Or did a series of coincidences trigger the conflicts, as so often happens when a closely packed urban population is divided by race or religion? (1983, p. 243).

J.A. McGuckin notes:

Cyril's early actions as archbishop reveal him as a reformer, trying to bring order into the ecclesiastical administration, but not entirely able to control the popular forces on which his power base depended (2004, p.7).

Orestes: The Cause of the Outbreak of Violence

Orestes, the Prefect of Alexandria, was the cause of the outbreak of violence, since he arrested a great devotee of Saint Cyril and publicly tortured him simply for suspecting that he was spying for Saint Cyril.

Young writes:

The first outbreak of violence came when a great devotee of Cyril...was caught eavesdropping on an occasion when the prefect was issuing regulations for the Jewish theatricals on the Sabbath. Orestes...arrested [Cyril's] supposed spy, and there and then publicly tortured him (1983, p. 243).

Davis notes:

Cyril's conflict with the government, and particularly with Orestes, rapidly escalated during the rioting that broke out between Christians and Jews in the city. On the eve of the rioting, Orestes had subjected one of Cyril's most avid supporters to public torture on suspicion of spying (2004, p. 72).

The outbreak of violence, apart from frequent complaints about Saint Cyril to the imperial court by means of Orestes, provides strong evidence that Orestes wanted to stir up trouble against Saint Cyril in order to dispose of him. Orestes imagined Saint Cyril to be his rival, and the Patriarch's prominence among his flock and, likewise, the Coptic people's acknowledgement of him as a good shepherd who gave himself for their sake, perhaps, made Orestes feel that his authority over the city was being challenged.

Tensions Escalate Between Christians and Jews

Young provides a brief, yet accurate, account of the episode of tension between Christians and Jews in Alexandria:

Cyril complained to the Jewish leaders, who promptly plotted against the Christians. At night they raised an outcry that a certain Church was on fire, and then slaughtered all the Christians who turned out to save it (1983, p. 243).

Here, we unquestionably observe that Christians were slaughtered and that Orestes the prefect did not react. As a good pastor, and in order to save his flock, Saint Cyril

moved as quickly as possible to prevent further shedding of blood. Together with the Christians, he drove the Jews out of the city, but did not order the killing of even one Jew despite the death of many Christians that same night. Saint Cyril wrote to the emperor saying that he “was defending the Christian interests in the city in the face of concerted attacks.” (McGuckin, 2004, p. 15).

The *Parabalani*

Subsequent to the episode of the Jews, Young writes that, sensing the need for their help, “About five hundred monks came to the city from the Nitrian desert to defend their Patriarch...” (Young, 1983, p. 243) which, in the first instance, proves that the monks only arrived after the episode of the Jews. These monks were named the *Parabalani*. They came from the desert to defend their pope and their people against violent acts; placing their lives at risk for the Orthodox Christian faith.

The *Parabalani* most likely originated in Egypt with the service of burying corpses of thousands of martyrs, as well as burying the dead during plagues. A note on the epithet *Parabalani*:

From the Greek meaning “to venture” or “to expose one’s self,” the name denotes members of a brotherhood which in the early church, first at Alexandria and then at Constantinople, nursed the sick and buried the dead. They risked their lives in their exposure to contagious diseases, and probably originated during an epidemic. They were also a kind of bodyguard for the bishop. Their number was never large: the Codex Theodosianus (416) restricted the enrollment to 500 in Alexandria, with a later increase to 600, while in Constantinople their number was reduced from 1,100 to 950, according to the Codex Justinianus. Chosen by the bishop and under his control...they were listed among the clergy and enjoyed those privileges. Their presence at public gatherings or in theaters was legally forbidden, but they did take part in public life. It appears they are not mentioned after Justinian’s time (Douglas, 1978, p. 747).

It is needful to distinguish between the *Parabalani* and the Christian mob who slayed Hypatia. The *Parabalani* were not involved in her murder, but as we shall see, blame was wholly laid upon the Christian mob after the murder.

Pagans and Paganism to the Copts

Young writes that the *Parabalani*,

...caught Orestes out in his chariot. It is clear that the monks saw Orestes as a representative of paganism, in spite of his protestations that he had been baptized by the bishop of Constantinople. They started abusing him and one threw a stone which struck Orestes on the head. The city population now rushed to the rescue and the monk who had injured the prefect was tortured so severely that he died (1983, p. 243).

Davis summarizes the series of events as follows:

...after Cyril's expulsion of Jews from certain parts of the city, Orestes sent a letter to the emperor complaining about Cyril's activities. When Orestes subsequently rebuffed the bishop's attempts at a reconciliation, a large group of Cyril's monastic supporters...accosted the prefect in the streets of Alexandria while he was riding in his chariot. A number of them then screamed insults at him, calling him an "idolater"...One overexcited monk, a man names Ammonius, threw a stone at Orestes and wounded him in the head. Once again, Orestes' official response was to have the offending party arrested and tortured...Ammonius died as a result of his severe treatment (2004, p. 72).

Concerning the above, the following must be considered: Firstly, the most noteworthy point is the fact that prior to the incident between the *Parabalani* and Orestes, and before Hypatia's slaying, Saint Cyril sought, in vain, to be reconciled with Orestes. It is highly probable that the acceptance of reconciliation by Orestes may have indeed prevented the sequence of events leading to the murder; it is thus inaccurate to portray Saint Cyril as the villain, when in reality it was Orestes who rejected Saint Cyril's offer of peace.

Secondly, no attention was given to Saint Cyril's devotee whom Orestes tortured publicly, nor the slightest regard paid to the monk who was tortured to death as a second act of violence from Orestes' side.

Thirdly, Orestes was against the Christians, and this fact is highlighted in the episode of the Jews and, as we shall see hereafter, in the case of the murder of Hypatia.

And, fourthly, paganism, which was rightly considered a demonic force, was still practiced in Alexandria. It was the role of the church to eradicate it and save her faithful from the destructive effect which it had on their souls and their eternal life.

The Murder of Hypatia

At the beginning of Saint Cyril's fourth year as pope, a mob of Christians ambushed the carriage of the famous Neo-platonic philosopher Hypatia and dragged her into a church where they murdered her. Since the time of the pagan philosopher Damascius (130 years after the events) and onwards until the present day, Saint Cyril's enemies held him personally responsible for the crime.

John Bishop of Nikiu in his book *The Chronicle* (690AD) states:

And in those days there appeared in Alexandria a female philosopher, a pagan named Hypatia, and she was devoted at all times to magic, astrolabes and instruments of music, and she beguiled many people through (her) Satanic wiles. And the governor of the city honored her exceedingly; for she had beguiled him through her magic. And he ceased attending church as had been his custom. But he went once under circumstances of danger. And he not only did this, but he drew many believers to her, and he himself received the unbelievers at his

house (John, Bishop of Nikiu. *The Chronicle*. 84.87-103.Oxford, 1916).

Young states that Hypatia was,

The most distinguished pagan of the time...a Neoplatonist philosopher who could hold her own in any academic circle. Orestes was clearly impressed by her and they were frequently in each other's company. The Christian mob decided it was she who was influencing Orestes against Cyril—the pagan connection again! (1983, pp. 243-244).

As we have seen from the quotations by the above historians, the larger Christian community (not the *Parabalani*) despised Hypatia—assuming that she had influenced Orestes by her philosophies since she was always in his company. This larger mob, made up of Christians—but not comprised of the *Parabalani*—believed that she was the cause of the prefect's enmity towards the church.

A closer look at early Christian history will show that generations of Christians, unwilling to yield to paganism (or other religious practices that conflicted with their own Christian beliefs) were severely tortured—without discretion of age or gender— sometimes for years on end, and then martyred at the hands of pagan emperors and governors; yet the history of their sufferings and deaths are neglected by modern historians. It is interesting to ask: Why then does the death of one pagan philosopher at the hands of a Christian mob, namely Hypatia, arouse such interest while the murder of so many Christians is left unaddressed and unnoticed? We can answer this question by once again stating that: The historian always has a political, religious or social agenda that is promulgated by his/her writing of a certain type of history, and there is always a larger structure of power which directs the historian's pen. Furthermore, in the case of Hypatia's murder, we can unmistakably argue that contemporary, and ironically enough, ultimately homogenizing notions of pluralism and social diversity have influenced how we understand this fifth century event. Not only is such an approach historically anachronistic, since it imposes a contemporary western-influenced notion of a so-called egalitarian society on a fifth century situation, it also runs the risk of reproducing a dominant, one-sided historical narrative. There is no doubt that the slaying of Hypatia was a horrific event—as was the slaying of thousands of Christian martyrs—however, in considering the events surrounding this unfortunate event, we must not be too hasty in applying our familiar analytic categories and discourses to a situation in which they are not relevant.

Analyses by present-day historians in the light of the writings of historians contemporary to events themselves.

Having outlined the events surrounding Hypatia's slaying, it is now imperative to examine the writings of historians and authors who do offer an analytic interpretation of the historical account. From these sources, we can see quite plainly that it is entirely incorrect to suggest that Saint Cyril was implicated in the crime.

In his book, *Saint Cyril of Alexandria and the Christological Controversy*, J.A. McGuckin offers a brief discussion of the Hypatia event, and very reasonably explains that those historians who accuse Saint Cyril of Hypatia's murder have

completely decontextualized the historical events and have mistakenly put the burden of Hypatia's murder on the shoulders of Saint Cyril in spite of the fact that Socrates (380/408- 450) who was the only contemporary historian in Saint Cyril's day to write about this event, did not agree with them.

Socrates was the greatest historian during Saint Cyril's days. He "was born at Constantinople, probably early in the reign of Theodosius the younger, A.D. 408." (Or according to others A.D. 380). As a strong supporter of the Novatians, Socrates despised Saint Cyril; and for this reason, among others, he sought to bring Saint Cyril and his church into disrepute. However it is clear that he did not state that Saint Cyril enticed the mob to murder Hypatia.

McGuckin writes:

Socrates says that this event 'brought no small reproach on Cyril and the church of the Alexandrians'. Some, most famously Gibbon who calls the murder 'an exploit of Cyril's,' blatantly misinterpret this remark when they consider the murder as an act in which he was personally involved...The pagan philosopher Damascius also recounted the incident specifically attributing personal blame and complicity to Cyril, but he was writing 130 years after the events, and his whole account is evidently prejudiced from the start and suffused with a bitter hatred of the way in which Christianity had suppressed his profession and way of life. Following Gibbon, Charles Kingsley, with more regard for romance than fact in his novel 'Hypatia', lost no opportunity to paint Cyril as the evil villain of the piece, and the mythic caricature he provided became fashionable. More recently, Wickham is more just to Cyril, and certainly on the grounds of deeper scholarly judgment, when he summarizes the early crises of his administration as follows: 'The facts are not to be denied. The picture they yield is not one of a fanatical priest, hungry for power, heading a howling mob, but of an untried leader attempting, and initially failing, to master popular forces' (2004, pp. 14-15).

In line with McGuckin's analysis, Wace and Piercy state:

As for Damascius's assertion that Cyril really prompted the murder...we cannot consider as evidence the statement of a pagan philosopher who lived about 130 years after the event, and was a thorough hater of Christianity. We are justified in regarding it, with Canon Robertson...as "an unsupported calumny" (1994, p. 236).

McGuckin also points out in *The Theology of St Cyril of Alexandria: A Critical Appreciation* that:

Cyril of Alexandria has been the victim of a good deal of European scholarly myopia in recent centuries; most of it with

unacknowledged imperialist attitudes, and some of it not free of its own kinds of racist agenda...In sections of my historical study on Cyril, which for me were significant (though peripheral to the fundamental narrative), I tried to point out how Gibbon's Enlightenment agenda of villainizing Cyril (as a demonstration of how Christianity corrupted the Roman Empire), or the Victorian agenda which flayed him morally (as part of the attempt to dislocate Anglo-Catholic Alexandrian Christologies in the cause of a newly ascendant Kenotic-Humanist Christology) were profoundly anachronistic approaches mounted by scholars with vested interests lying not too far below the page...The irresponsible condemnation of Cyril's moral character is found especially in the romantic nonsense pedalled as history in Charles Kingsley's novel *Hypatia*. This latter cost Cyril his volume in the Victorian series of patristic translations into English, such as *The Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*. C. Gore and H.M. Relton exemplify those who, while versed in early Christian doctrine, advocated a Kenotic-Humanist Christology. Cyril then was one of the victims of a sea-change transpiring in the face of Anglican Christology in the generation after the Oxford Movement and in the time of that church's increasing self-alignment with the continental Liberal Protestant agenda (Weinandy and Keating, 203, pp. 205, 207-208).

L. R. Wickham further attests in the *Encyclopedia of Early Christianity*:

Violence marred the first years of his episcopate in a city prone to riots and lynchings. Quarrels among pagans, Jews, and Christians, and between Cyril and the governor, Orestes, culminated in the horrifying murder by a Christian mob of the distinguished pagan philosopher Hypatia (415)...That Cyril was responsible for the violence is a myth enshrined in Charles Kingsley's novel *Hypatia* and since perpetuated; that he was not, for some years, master of his own house is a fair deduction; and the government at the time did not condemn him personally (Wickham, L. R. in Ferguson, 1998, pp. 310-311).

Historian A. Louth also writes:

...Cyril has suffered such neglect in modern times that, apart from his conciliar letters, he is unrepresented in the standard late-Victorian English translation of the Fathers, the *Library of Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*. Part of the reason for this is doubtless his depiction in Charles Kingsley's famous novel, *Hypatia* (1853), as a sinister figure, cruel and unscrupulous. All this, however, provides a poor basis for understanding one whom Christians from at least the seventh century onwards regarded as the 'Seal of the Fathers' (Young, Ayres, and Louth, 2004, p. 353).

One must wonder why Charles Kingsley has maliciously characterized Saint Cyril in such a way. Why would a novelist, writing about Hypatia's murder 1,438 years after the event, conjure up such a false and slanderous fiction of Saint Cyril and his papacy? While we may not be able to directly answer this question, it is necessary to underscore the fact that Kingsley's work is *not* an historical one, nor should it be read as an historical account of fifth century Alexandrian society and religious conflict, but rather as a fiction. McGuckin rightly argues that it is simply irresponsible scholarship on the part of historians who take up Kingsley's work for history, rather than fiction. Based on McGuckin's above argument regarding the Victorian agenda to flay Saint Cyril's historical persona, we clearly see that such an adamant political posture has, unfortunately, yielded irresponsible scholarship and what has ultimately become, a history informed by fiction.

In *Hypatia of Alexandria* by M. Dzielska, the author offers a revisionist history of the Hypatia narrative and is critical of the allegations against Saint Cyril. In an email correspondence with Dzielska she states that historically there is,

No direct link between the instigation of Saint Cyril and the murder of Hypatia. Despite Damascius' (*Life of Isidorus*) ...tendentious statements accusing Cyril the remaining sources make the criminal act appear as a murder of political, not religious matter connected with social tensions and conflicts fought at the time in Alexandria between rival groups within lay and church authorities. (Excerpt from email correspondence with Maria Dzielska on Thursday, 2 March, 2006).

Susan Wessel wrote in her book *Cyrrill of Alexandria and the Nestorian Controversy: The Making of a Saint and of a Heretic*:

The *parabalani* were never officially implicated in the greatest 'act of terror' of the time, Hypatia's murder, for none of the laws even alludes to the incident.

She added in the same book:

In February 418 Theodosius II promulgated a new set of laws that restored Cyril's authority over the *parabalani* and increased their numbers from five to six hundred... Had Cyril and the *parabalani* been unambiguously implicated in the murder of Hypatia, then it is most unlikely that Theodosius would ever have restored the group to Cyril's control. We may plausibly conclude that Hypatia's murder can be attributed to a ruffian band of Christians who were not among the *parabalani* but who believed that Hypatia's highly visible encounters with the Alexandrian elite threatened Cyril's exercise of power within the city (Wessel, 2004, p. 56,57).

Also, in S. J. Davis' book, *The Early Coptic Papacy: The Egyptian Church and its Leaders in Late Antiquity*, Davis explains that the accusations against Saint Cyril are unfounded and that it is historically inaccurate to charge him with the murder. He undermines all accusations against Saint Cyril by showing just how complex and

volatile was the whole situation. Davis notes that “Hypatia’s murder appears to have been the result, at least in part, of a complex ecclesiastical-juridical power struggle between Cyril and Orestes...” (2004, p. 72). Also speaking of Alexandria’s unstable social environment as the cause of Hypatia’s murder, McGuckin writes in *St Cyril of Alexandria: On the Unity of Christ*:

Several commentators, especially those who have wished to discredit Cyril’s theology, have set these charges of racism, riot, and murder, at his door, and castigated him as a demagogue with few, if any principles. This is to read the events naively. Life in any fifth-century Byzantine city was violent beyond the imagination and experience of most moderns, and mob violence was almost an institutionalized part of the Roman social system. Emperors, city governors, and eventually Christian bishops, who assumed more and more political power from the fourth century onwards, all had to acknowledge and deal with this (1995, p. 14).

Anglican historian Canon W. Bright in *A History of the Church from the Edict of Milan, A.D. 313, to the Council of Chalcedon, A.D. 451*, clearly defends Saint Cyril stating:

Cyril was no party to this hideous deed, but it was the work of men whose passions he had originally called out. Had there been no on-slaught on the synagogues, there would doubtless have been no murder of Hypatia (1860, pp. 274-275).

The learned... Roman Catholic hagiographer, Alan Butler (*Lives of the Saints*, sub Jan. 28), considers Cyril innocent and appeals to the silence of Orestes and Socrates...Walch, Schröckh, Gibbon, and Milman incline to hold Cyril responsible for the murder of Hypatia...But the evidence is not sufficient (Schaff, 1910, p. 943).

“...Socrates, does not attribute any specific role to Cyril in the events leading up to Hypatia’s murder. He only observes that the violent act subsequently brought “opprobrium” upon both Cyril and his church (Davis, 2004, p. 71).

“... there is no direct or reliable evidence that he [Saint Cyril] ordered a mafia-style “hit” on Hypatia.” (Davis, 2004, p. 71).

“No trustworthy account connects Cyril directly with her murder.” (Wace and Piercy, 1994, p. 504).

“...there seems to be no proof that...[Saint Cyril] was guilty of this hideous crime.” (Quasten, p. 117).

Indeed, if Saint Cyril was responsible for Hypatia’s murder, the first person to take action against him would have been Orestes, and the first to declare his guilt would have been Socrates. The fact that neither acted thus, clearly declares his innocence.

The Christological Controversy

Thirteen years after Hypatia's murder, Saint Cyril was engaged in a fiery dogmatic struggle with Nestorius, patriarch of Constantinople (428-431). For this reason, Nestorius considered Saint Cyril his greatest enemy and searched for any cause to have him eliminated from the ecclesiastical and theological arena:

The state of tension which had arisen between Cyril and Nestorius had induced some Alexandrians, who had been punished by Cyril on account of gross moral excesses, now to go to Constantinople, and there to bring forward complaints against their bishop. One of these complaints had been guilty of dishonesty as a reliever of the poor, the second had shockingly ill-treated his mother, the third had stolen; and Nestorius had granted these people a hearing. Cyril now complains of this in a fresh letter to Nestorius, and joins with it, as the principal thing, a request that Nestorius will redress the grievance which he has occasioned by his sermons (Hefele, pp. 20-21).

Accordingly, we may conclude that if there were any serious accusation against Saint Cyril, that is that he killed Hypatia, it would have been certain that his enemies would have accused him of such a charge rather than these preposterous charges. And so, it is essential to ask: If the accusations of murder against Saint Cyril carried even a small glimmer of truth, why were they not brought up by Nestorius and employed as powerful weapons to utterly destroy Saint Cyril's reputation, or have him deposed or arrested?

At the time of the controversy, the emperor Theodosius II ruled over the eastern part of the Roman Empire from Constantinople. Being the official location of the Empire's administration, all of the imperial courts, offices, and official records were located in that city. Had there been any evidence that Saint Cyril was directly responsible for Hypatia's murder, there undoubtedly would have been a written record of the case. However, there never was any official documented charge against Saint Cyril. Further to this point we must consider the following: The patriarchate of Constantinople was of course, also based in Constantinople, and thus it would have been quite simple for Nestorius to acquire information from official records. If there was indeed any official accusation against Saint Cyril, Nestorius would have seized the opportunity to make use of these accusations to slight the Alexandrian pope, and to raise an official lawsuit against him in the high court of Constantinople based on the decisions of the Emperor before the convention of the Council of Ephesus.

Further, the emperor had given order that no civil accusation should be brought against any member of the Synod, either before the Synod itself or before the court of justice in Ephesus; but that, during this time, only the Supreme Court at Constantinople should be the competent tribunal for such cases (Hefele, p. 43).

Yet we know for certain that records of such charges do not, and never have, existed; and that Nestorius never attempted to take such action or even raise such a

case. On the contrary, we find that Emperor Theodosius instructed Saint Cyril to preside over the sessions of the third ecumenical council of Ephesus, and Pope Celestine of Rome sent a letter to Saint Cyril saying: “Accordingly, since the authentic teaching of our see is in harmony with you, using our apostolic authority you will carry out this decree with accurate firmness.” (McEnerney, Letter 12, p. 69).

The Christological Controversy reached its climax at the Council of Ephesus (431); however, in the minutes of the council, we find no record of the case of St Cyril and the murder of Hypatia (to view a copy of the minutes refer to C.J. Hefele, *A History of the Councils of the Church: Volume III*).

We read in some historical documents (Hefele quoting *Socrates*, vii. 34., p. 44) that Nestorius arrived to Ephesus escorted by a large number of armed soldiers of Count Irenaeus. These soldiers sided with Nestorius and John of Antioch and were at enmity with St Cyril and the Council of Ephesus. When John of Antioch arrived late to Ephesus, bishops who were representatives of the council attempted to inform John of the decisions of the council; however, the soldiers prevented the bishops and then proceeded to insult and beat them. These events took place with the knowledge and approval of Count Irenaeus. If the soldiers had believed that Saint Cyril was responsible for Hypatia’s murder, this would have been an opportune time to reproach and taunt him outside of the council. Yet the fact that they did not raise the accusation again proves that Saint Cyril did not, in any way, play a part in the assassination.

It is unjust to accuse the pope or patriarch of any church for the unlawful actions of some people in his community who are influenced and affected by different motives, most of which are political, social, or racial. The pope or patriarch can only instruct his followers and direct them in the correct path, but he cannot be held responsible for the actions of every group.

Suggestions for Further Reading

Davis, S.J. *The Early Coptic Papacy: The Egyptian Church and its Leaders in Late Antiquity*. American University in Cairo Press: Cairo, New York, 2004.

On pp. 71–74 Davis provides a thorough outline of the social and political circumstances in Alexandria at the time of Hypatia’s murder and shows how her murder was the result of a volatile social environment.

McGuckin, J.A. ‘Cyril of Alexandria: Bishop and Pastor’ in *The Theology of St Cyril of Alexandria: A Critical Appreciation* T.G. Weinandy & D.A. Keating (eds). T&T Clark: London, 2003. (pp. 205-211).

Thomas, Lewis. *The History of Hypatia—A Most Impudent Schoolmistress of Alexandria, Murder’d and Torn to Pieces by the Populace—In Defence of St Cyril and the Alexandrian Clergy, From the Aspersions of Mr Toland*. (London, 1721).
www.polyamory.org/~howard/Hypatia/Lewis_1721.html

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